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Art education and the usefulness question

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In considering any aim of education or any item in the curriculum, we inevitably face the usefulness question – what use is science, history, mathematics, art? When we talk about anything, particularly knowledge, in terms of its use, we reduce it to something less than it is. When we think of mathematics in terms of its utility, we think only of arithmetic and geometry that we use in practical situations, not mathematics. We consider history useful because we need to know our past and how we came to be what we are. But this description reduces history to an investigation into the formation of identity.



With art, there is an additional problem beyond reduction; art seems less useful than other subjects. To avoid confronting this, we usually use the phrase "art for art's sake". But this phrase does nothing to capture the importance of art, rather it hints at an acknowledgement that art is less important because it is not useful enough. It might be helpful to do the opposite and analyze the uses of art to understand if there is value in art beyond utility. A cursory analysis of the practice of art education unearthed three kinds of responses to the usefulness question.

Developing artists

Art education is important to groom artists. Education ought to help some of us realize the potential and develop the ability to create objects of art (paintings, sculptures, singing, dancing, stand-up comedy or any other form). Art education from this perspective

acquires a process oriented approach – teaching children to create works of art and develop expertise in an art form. For a select few, art education furthers the possibility of developing a career. *Prima facie* there is nothing wrong in this view to art. But what about the many of us who do not have a talent to create something artistically valuable? Is art education useless for us?

Art as means to other ends

Another response to the usefulness question takes care of this problem. Art develops creativity, empathy, critical thinking and many other attitudes and dispositions that all humans ought to have. Art helps us develop abilities to think beyond the obvious, helps us imagine alternative views to the world, makes us experiment with the form of things. Art from other cultures helps us understand diversity and empathize with the other. Even if all of us do not create good art, working on it and learning to appreciate art, develops capabilities that are important and useful in life.

But these abilities are important in themselves irrespective of whether it is art or something else that helps us develop them. Mathematics, science, running a business, dealing with relationships, engaging with social issues, all demand creativity, empathy, and imagination. If the inculcation of these general values is the actual aim, art becomes a mere tool to achieve these larger aims of education.

Is that a problem? Probably not. But art is being relegated to being a means for something else. It is possible that these capabilities can be taught through other methods. We could use science or mathematics to teach imagination, social studies to develop empathy for people different from us, moral philosophy to understand moral values. Why art then?

Art as pedagogical device

Some people say things like empathy cannot be cognized, they need to be felt. Art engages our emotions and feelings directly. So art should be used as a pedagogical device to teach other subjects. This approach is usually justified by a caricature of Howard Gardner's taxonomy of intelligences – that some people engage better with concepts through music, spatial form or kinesthetic/bodily engagement – and teachers should use different art forms to engage students in learning.

Following from this, stories and films are used to introduce students to history, songs and poetry to introduce children to moral questions, or toys and sculptures to learn geometry. But indiscriminate integration of aesthetics with other subjects creates several problems.

Let us consider teaching morality using art. Art primarily triggers emotional responses that affect us very deeply – at least effective art does. Moving people into feeling for moral issues or feeling empathy (or sympathy) looks like a reasonable method to start thinking about moral problems. But judging the morality of a situation, deciding what is the 'right thing' to do, is not a question of being emotionally moved alone. We need to think further which involves moral reasoning and being convinced about what is the right thing to do. Being moved is not enough because we could also be moved into doing morally wrong things. Often, morally wrong acts are done elegantly and beautifully and morally right acts could be graceless and unseemly. Feeling moved or doing something gracefully does not make an act morally right or wrong.

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Similarly, using stories to teach history conflates history and fiction and blurs lines between fiction, historical fiction, and history. When we read a story, we are not looking for evidence of truth, we enjoy the fictional form. But history is not fiction. History is a set of narratives developed from evidence available to us. Historical fiction – stories developed from a few known historical facts – is not history. Neither is fiction. By introducing fiction to teach history we run a huge risk of encouraging the idea that they are the same. This creates an additional burden for the teacher of protecting history from fiction and the historical method from creative storytelling.

All disciplines and subject areas have concepts and methods that deal with specific kinds of propositional truths. These demand particular tools, methods and ways of thinking. Teaching these subjects through art – which itself demands different ways of understanding – can confuse a child's understanding of the discipline being taught. In the process we also lose something essential to art because it seems useful as a pedagogical device.

Intrinsic value of art

Does art have something unique then? Art and its effect is usually described as “aesthetic experience”. A poem, a short story, or a film evoke strong emotions and feelings. Musical compositions move us, calm us, or make us feel exhilarated. Why does that happen?

Is it because of the content in the work of art? Not really. A short story is not beautiful because of the importance of the issues it raises. Issues raised by short stories could also be raised through prose or any other form. Short stories have the effect they do because of the way they deal with the content. The form in which the story is written moves us in ways that direct plain statements do not. That is why some stories affect us deeply, whereas some others do not even move us. We like some songs and we don't like others – even if the lyrics convey the same message.

Paul Hirst describes this phenomenon very evocatively. “Works of art” he says, “are not really symbols and do not really have meaning. They are not like words and sentences, they are rather like oohs and aahs, grunts and groans, cries of ecstasy and pain. In other words they are expressions of feelings or emotions, not statements about anything, even about feelings or emotions.”*

He is pointing out that art expresses feelings and emotions and it is the form of artistic creations that create the aesthetic experience. This effect is irrespective of the truth value or moral content of the object of art.

Let's consider a common situation. Good oratory is a very effective way to create an aesthetic experience. It is not uncommon for us to be moved by the sheer power of oratory. But “He said it so well,” is not evidence for “What he said is true,” or “He is right.” There is a difference between the aesthetic value, the epistemic value (true/false) and moral value (right/wrong) of things. Evaluation of the aesthetic experience tells us whether we found something beautiful or not, not whether it is true or false, or right or wrong. A falsehood could be stated very beautifully. A moral wrong could be done very elegantly.

Aims of art education

What does all this mean for art education? This analysis gives us compelling reasons for teaching art simply because we ought to teach art.

Aesthetic experience and art is integral to human life. We desire beauty in things we do. In fact it is difficult for humans not to evaluate or judge the beauty of things. Our conceptions of beauty lie not only in complex musical compositions, the intricate patterns in an abstract painting or the elegant movements of a classical dancer. We conceive beauty even in mundane and banal daily activities by doing them artfully. Whether it is arranging food on our plate, architecture of our homes, decorating insignificant corners of our home, clothes we wear, colours we like...aesthetics are important enough that we ought to educate our children to learn to appreciate beauty for its own sake.

Artworks are like concentrated doses of aesthetic experiences. Studying art in different forms allows us to develop the abilities to contemplate complex forms of beauty, understand and develop a language that allows us to express profound emotions and feelings that words do not. If we view art this way, we need not focus on teaching how to produce good art alone. Appreciating good art, being able to express appreciation, debating and arguing with others who do not like a work of art that we do – all these activities ought to be as much part of art education as actually drawing, painting, singing, dancing, etc. They are equally important for everyone – talented artists and non-artists.

Educating children to appreciate the form of things is important because they ought to be able to distinguish between the aesthetic, the epistemic, and the moral content of things. We need to be able to distinguish between elegant and inelegant proofs of a mathematical theorem, and also know that the test of a proof's correctness lies in the method used and logical reasoning, not in the beauty of the way it is constructed. It is alright to have an ugly and inelegant but correct proof of a mathematical theorem as much as it is alright to perform a morally good act in an unseemly and graceless manner.

Appreciating beauty is essential to the human condition. Artists device profound and complex art forms that give us valuable experiences of beauty. Art education ought to make it possible for all of us to appreciate beauty in all these different forms. That is reason enough for everyone to be educated in art.

*“Literature and fine arts as a unique form of knowledge” by Paul Hirst. Published in “Knowledge and the Curriculum – a collection of philosophical papers” by Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. In 1974.

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